

## SETTING THE SCENE

Late in 1748, a great edifice in the form of a classical temple arose in the Green Park in London's west end, opposite St. James's Palace, King George II's residence. This edifice would be the launching pad for the fireworks to celebrate the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, a festive occasion which would take place the following April on the anniversary of the signing. The preparations for the extravaganza were the rage amongst Londoners, and the popular press made great sport of it all. The construction spawned announcements of progress on the site and many firsthand descriptions of the subsequent spectacle. Newspapers of the period abound with ribald satires and highly pointed criticism, while comical pamphlets, letters and memoirs mercilessly lampoon the entire grand conceit. Division, disagreement, misunderstanding and folly enrich the literature of this extraordinary event. There is much to draw upon, making the documentation a gold mine for the historian and for the writer of historical fiction. To add to the fun, I don't know another period in English history when the satire was so pointed, so well-honed, and done with such panache.

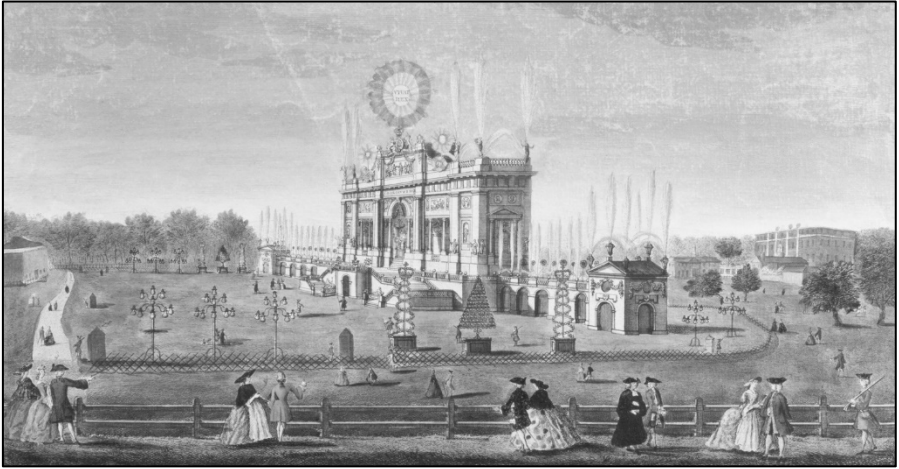
I have summoned ten eyewitnesses, all of whom were engaged on this incredible project, so I can record their impressions and memories. All these characters lived and breathed, and several of them left records of their doings. But all their documentary material only comes alive when the tale is told in the first person. It is only when we hear the characters' voices that we are truly drawn into the narrative. I feel privileged to have been their conduit so their interlocking stories may be passed along. But did it all transpire as these ten narrators have related it to me? Well, in the greater part, yes, but if not quite, they probably think it should have. And over a span of two centuries and more, I can hardly argue with their views and memories.

Occasionally, these raconteurs make passing mention of details from their everyday experiences and the milieu in which they lived. These references might be obscure to the modern reader, so I have included endnotes for clarification and sometimes enlightenment. You may refer to these as you wish, or leave them alone, because they add

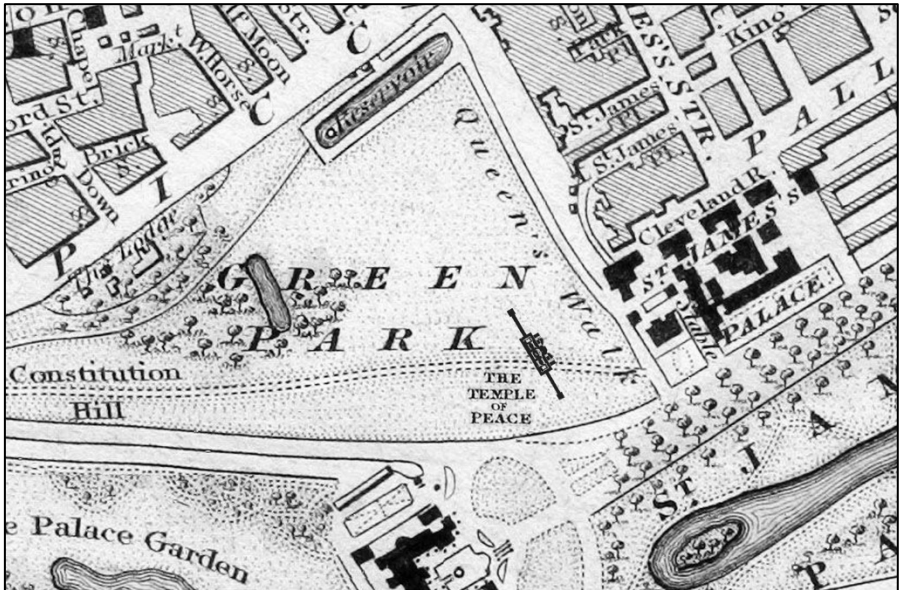
nothing to the immediate flow of their stories. I have made no conscious adjustments to the timeframe, allowing the historical record and its witnesses to dictate the unfolding of events. I'm sure you will appreciate the contemporary illustrations on the opposite page of the "machine" for launching the fireworks—the Temple of Peace—and the map of its location. Further in the narrative you will find the official drawing of the machine and the frontispiece of the subsequent publication. All these, together, give some idea of the vast scale of this extraordinary achievement.

Now let us proceed forthwith to the Green Park and meet our first eyewitness, so he can tell us what all the fuss is about.

# THE SCENE OF THE ACTION



*The Temple of Peace, the temporary "machine" for launching the fireworks, erected in five months in the Green Park. (Image courtesy of the Gerald Coke Handel Foundation.)*



*The position of the Temple of Peace in the Green Park, facing St. James's Palace. The temple has been added graphically to a contemporary map.*

# PRELUDE

John Byrom, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Orford (1692 to 1763)  
Fellow of the Royal Society, Poet and Inventor

*In which the first eyewitness opens our story*

It was an astonishing spectacle, supreme amongst any other that season, or for many a year, truth to tell. But the celebration of peace between our German king and the damned Austrians and French and whatnot was hardly the reason I went to the Green Park. I care not a damp fart upon squabbles across the Channel. I'm English through and through, and damned proud of it, although 'tis more than unwise to hold in public a view that Hanover is less legitimate than Stuart. Besides, the so-called peace that our oh-so-English George had wrought at Aix-la-Chapelle was stale news by April of 1749. No, for me, 'twas purely for the spectacle, for 'tis not often one can have music, cannon and fireworks all laid on in one evening. 'Twas indeed a grand conceit.

I perforce left my carriage in charge of the driver far down James Street, a fair walk from the gates of the Green Park, because of a crowd of like-minded gentry milling forward. I say gentry, for those were the ones I mixed with, but in truth, anyone in London with a lust for spectacle was there, from the highest to the lowest. This is the great vexation of laying on spectacles at no charge. It is not pleasant to go far afoot in the London streets, for one sees the filth of humanity closer than is desirable. On this night, the risk of being accosted by cut-purses, beggars or the gin-sodden refuse of the lower sort was greater in the press of people.

As I stepped quickly through the east gate of the park, happily unmolested, I encountered Horace Walpole, a chance acquaintance. I had met him recently on this visit to London, and we found we shared a kindred wit even though he was a Whig Member of Parliament. He represented somewhere in Cornwall at that time, although he never set a foot farther west than Twickenham that I know of. He knew not a hint of my political views, for I hold them to be mine and no one else's. In truth,

Whig or not, we were united only by our wit and a fondness for coffee, snuff and fine drink. That's plenty enough acquaintance for a stroll together in the park.

'Damnable press of bodies,' I remarked as we came away from the crowd. 'Hard put not to be set upon and robbed.'

'I hear tell Fielding hath designs for a force of constabulary.'

'Aye, from his Bow Street office. Cannot come sooner.'

'Assuming they will be sufficient.'

We walked side by side into the greenspace as the sun was falling before us, and there was the great erection we had heard so much of, silhouetted by the last of the light. This gigantic Temple of Peace designed upon classical lines had been built upon the grass of the park facing the Queen's Library of St. James's Palace. Some 400 and more feet long it was, and rising to at least a quarter that height. And soaring even above that, a gigantic sun figure, a vast firework wheel with VIVAT REX writ at its centre, to be picked out in fires when the show was to be played off. And this was no thing of stagecraft, this temple, being as thin as canvas and propped at the rear; no, 'twas a full building in its depth, with front, sides and back. It is quite remarkable what can be done with timber, plaister, canvas and paint, especially in the short few months since the start of its erection. It was extremely neat and pretty and grand to look at, and a world of fireworks were placed in an order that promised a most amazing scene when it was all to be in full display. His Majesty and other great folks were walking to see the machinery, but it was all railed about there, where the lords, ladies, commons, et cetera were sat under a scaffolding. They seemed to be under confinement in comparison to us mobility, who were enjoying the free air.

Accompanying the king was his youngest son William, Duke of Cumberland—him they call the Butcher for his bloody pursuit of the ragged Highlanders after Culloden—with Lady Yarmouth, the sovereign's mattress bounce, Princess Emilia, Lady Pembroke and old John, Duke of Montagu, whose nose had been in the whole pie from the start. The fence about the structure was picketed with fusiliers who stood at the ready with their weapons at their sides, preventing trespass of those who had not tickets.

'What think you of this squib castle?' I asked Walpole with a smile after we had surveyed its immensity.

‘Oh, I don’t doubt but ’twill be a fine spectacle. But the Peace gives not the least joy; the stocks do not rise, and the merchants are unsatisfied. And here, to rub their noses in it, the government is to give a magnificent firework.’

‘Aye, and one designed and fired off by foreigners. But you’d not deny yourself the entertainment?’

‘Oh, for myself, I enjoy a spectacle as much as the next man. Doth not signify that I subscribe to the principle.’

The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle had been signed the November past, and although His Majesty had long planned these festivities, their execution needs must wait until the ink was dry. And it was hardly opportune to stage such a spectacle in the winter months. We strolled closer to the fenced area where we could see the musicians on the platform of the machine, preparing the Grand Overture under the eyes of Mr Handel, who was standing upon a raised podium of wood. Trumpets, horns, reeds, drums and such, all warlike instruments for a peaceful occasion, but no one apparently taking this with any irony.

‘And Tweedledum is contracted to provide the music,’ I observed, seeing Mr Handel waving irascibly at his band of musicians.

He laughed at that. My rhyme lampooning George Frideric Handel, when he and Giovanni Bononcini were matching opera for opera like duelling puppets, was now common currency.<sup>i</sup>

‘Ah, but Tweedledee had the last laugh, did he not?’ said Walpole. ‘His *Te Deum* was performed last year at the signing of the Peace, which I am sure must have exercised Handel.’

‘Hardly. Pleased him, surely, Bononcini being dead these two years!’

We laughed again and shared a pinch of snuff from my pouch. I placed my pinch just so at the junction of my thumb and index finger, as did Walpole, and together we sniffed and sneezed almost simultaneous. There is nothing that more induces a kindred spirit amongst men than to expel one’s air explosively in unison. I sneezed again, returned my square of cambric to my vest pocket, and together we strode to the front of the structure. I was once more taken with the elaborateness of it all. The entire front of the pavilion was adorned with frets, gilding, artificial flowers, inscriptions, carvings and allegorical pictures. I counted at least twenty statues in relief, many friezes, festoons and medallions, and texts in Latin throughout. The principal text, which occupied a high place at the front

and centre, amused me in particular. Here, rendered in English, is said:

George II, the Assertor of our Liberty, the Establisher of our Tranquility,  
the Father of his People.<sup>ii</sup>

Oh, there was such irony in the father of our people being this man who took himself off overseas, fought battles for his Hanoverian holdings, and in so doing ran up a bill that he then foisted off upon the English people's Parliament. On one side of the façade, there was another depiction that also gave me wry amusement: His Majesty Giving Peace to Britannia. Fine sentiment... but for the fact that we'd had peace all along; damned if the warring frogs and cabbages and whoever on the Continent had spilled onto Britannia's soil, and the king and his butcher had done with the Scots long since.

That the sole function of this great erection was for this one occasion, and that it would be torn down thereafter, was a symbol to me of the extent to which our beloved sovereign will go to curry favour with his English subjects. And the extent, also, to which he most seriously misunderstands the people over whom he rules. I had never seen such a flurry of ribald pamphlets, lampoons and adverse press opinions as spewed forth since the public first learned of this regal folly. We had been laughing over the papers for months, yet were also titillated by the lure of it, so whatever one's politics, one was drawn to it and captivated by anticipation of it.

Behind the structure, ranged along Constitution Hill, were the guns of the Royal Train of Artillery, which were to fire the royal salute of 101 shots. Six pounders, twelve-pounders and great twenty-four-pound guns were ready blank-shotted, their gun captains and matrosses in attendance with ramrods, swabs and matches. Mr Charles Frederick, the Surveyor-General of the Ordnance, stood close by the viewing stand with a kerchief in his hand, ready to signal the start of the spectacle before riding forth to join his gunners on the hill.

The sun had long since slid behind the dwellings of Grosvenor Place when a single rocket was fired to call attention and bring all to order. At the rocket's report, Mr Handel on his podium bowed deeply to the king and the court, turned to his musicians with raised arms, and swept them down...

# NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> In present-day popular culture, Lewis Carroll takes all the credit for Byrom's little ditty.

<sup>ii</sup> GEORGIO. II. REGI. OPT. AVCTORI. SALVTIS. LIBERTATIS. VINDICI. FVNDATORI. QVIETIS. PATRI. PATRIAE.